

Early Christianity and the Greek language

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Standards of Greek mattered tremendously in the early centuries A.D., but the New Testament is sometimes said to be in bad Greek. What does this mean, and where does the idea come from? How did the early Christians cope?

I say potato and you say potato... getting your Greek just right

Languages naturally change over time, and conversational Greek had changed considerably between the classical period and the early centuries A.D. But the second and third centuries A.D. saw a tremendous revival of classical Attic Greek, the Greek of fifth- and fourth-century B.C. Athenian literature, for elegant writing and speech. This period saw the production of several 'Atticist' dictionaries to help one distinguish between approved (or 'Attic') and unapproved words. A typical entry in one such dictionary reads:

Not ὀρθρινός/orthrinós ('at dawn'), but ὀρθριος/orthrios without the -v/-n-. (Phrynichus, Eclogae)

The first word for 'at dawn', ὀρθρινός/orthrinós, is one that ordinary people of the second century A.D. might use. The second word, ὀρθριος/orthrios, was the approved classical word, no longer in ordinary use.

Giving the words an archaic twist

One author of this period who conformed to Atticist standards was the philosopher and historian Arrian. In the following sentence on practice cavalry charges, Arrian uses no fewer than four markedly classical expressions:

And the second charge occurs (γίγνεται/gígnetai) with (ξύν/ksún) two spears (δυοῖν λόγχειν/duoîn lóghchain), and one must throw these while charging with one's horse straight, as completely accurately as possible (ὥς...οἷόν τε/hōs...hoĩón te). (Arrian, Tactica)

Atticists specifically recommend γίγνεται/gígnetai 'occurs' rather than the ordinary post-classical γίνεται/gínetai; ξύν/ksún for 'with', rather than σύν/sún (both forms are found in classical

authors, but σύν/sún remained in ordinary use and was therefore considered less elegant than ξύν/ksún); and ὥς...οἷόν τε/hōs...hoĩón te for 'as X as possible', rather than ὥς δυνατόν/hōs dunatón. Furthermore, classical Greek boasted not only singulars and plurals but also duals, like Arrian's δυοῖν λόγχειν/duoîn lóghchain 'two spears', used when referring to two items. In post-classical Greek the dual dropped out of ordinary use, and accordingly Atticists speak approvingly of duals:

Attic authors use the dual νό/ñō ('we two'). Ordinary people use ἡμεῖς/hēmeīs ('we'). (Moeris)

Calling a spade a spade

Arrian also wrote up the teachings of the Stoic philosopher Epictetus, but did not give Epictetus the same elegant style as he gave himself. Indeed, Arrian claims to have written up Epictetus' words just as Epictetus spoke them. The following extract comes from a passage arguing that progressing in virtue does not consist merely of having read a book on virtue and being able to expound its contents:

Don't you know (οἶδας/oĩdas) that the whole book is worth five denarii? Does its expounder seem that he's worth more than five denarii? Then don't look in one place (ἀλλαχοῦ/allakhoũ) for your actions and in another (ἀλλαχοῦ/allakhoũ) for progress (προκοπή/prokopē).

Atticists specifically condemn post-classical οἶδας/oĩdas 'you know' for classical οἶσθα/oĩstha; the adverb ἀλλαχοῦ/allakhoũ 'in one/another place' for ἄλλοθι/állothi 'in one/another place' or ἄλλοσε/állose 'to one/another place' (although ἀλλαχοῦ/allakhoũ does, in fact, appear in classical literature); and προκοπή/prokopē 'progress'. In addition,

Epictetus here uses two post-classical constructions involving the word ὅτι/hóti 'that'. The proper classical expression for 'Don't you know that the whole book is worth five denarii?' would be, literally, 'Don't you know the whole book being worth five denarii?'. 'Does its expounder seem that he's worth more than five denarii?' ought to be 'Does its expounder seem to be worth more than five denarii?'.

One theory holds that Arrian took down Epictetus' exact words in shorthand whenever he heard Epictetus teaching. More likely, perhaps, is that Arrian simply gives us an impression of Epictetus' language and character. Epictetus was a man of humble origins, and Arrian ensures that he comes across as utterly unpretentious.

The Gospels: a lesson in how not to write classical Greek

Early Christian texts, such as all four canonical Gospels, were written in Greek that failed, to one degree or another, to conform to Atticist standards. Luke 24: 22–25 contains two unapproved words and two acceptable words in unapproved meanings:

...Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb (μνημεῖον/mnēmeĩon) early in the morning (ὀρθριναί/orthrinaí) and did not find his body; and they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb (μνημεῖον/mnēmeĩon), and found it just as (οὕτως καθώς/hoútōs kathōs) the women had said; but him they did not see." And he said to them, "O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken (ἐλάλησαν/elálēsan)!... (Revised Standard Version)

In addition to post-classical ὀρθρινός/orthrinós 'at dawn' (or its feminine plural ὀρθριναί/orthrinaí), mentioned earlier, οὕτως καθώς/hoútōs kathōs is not a classical expression for 'just as'. The word καθώς/kathōs incurs vigorous condem-

nation from the Atticist Phrynichus, who attacks an obscure grammarian, Gaius of Arethusa, for calling the word respectable on the basis of its use by the third-century B.C. historian Phylarchus. Phylarchus hardly counted as a classical author, and Phrynichus finds Gaius guilty of insufficient knowledge of proper classical sources. (Phylarchus, incidentally, is completely obscure today owing to the loss of his works, which some scholars blame on the Atticists' low opinion of his Greek.)

Another Atticist, Aelius Dionysius, tells us that *μνημεῖον*/*mnēmēion* is properly used not for a tomb but for a whole funerary monument. It is clear from the biblical accounts of Jesus' burial place that this was simply a tomb, not originally intended for Jesus: *μνημεῖον*/*mnēmēion* has to be taken in its post-classical sense.

The form *ἐλάλησαν*/*elālēsan* belongs to the verb *λάλειν*/*laleîn*, which in classical Greek meant 'chatter', but in post-classical Greek simply 'speak'. Phrynichus tells us to use the word only for 'chatter', but the meaning in Luke is clearly 'speak'. Luke also uses post-classical constructions here for 'slow to believe' and 'to believe all'.

Luke's is actually the most linguistically classical Gospel, yet his Greek hardly conforms to Atticist standards. The authors of the Gospels wrote as their own levels of education allowed, and with relatively uneducated audiences in mind. In addition, the canonical Gospels were written before the peak of the Atticist movement. There was certainly a difference between more and less educated Greek in the first century A.D., and the Gospels were not written in the most educated Greek available at the time, but over the next centuries they came to seem even less educated in the light of Atticism.

We don't need no education... except Homer

For highly educated Christians of the second century or later, one obvious reaction to the prevailing linguistic attitudes was to adopt a much more classical language, and some did. However, Christians could not simply overlook the fact that their developing canon of sacred texts was coming to sound increasingly uneducated.

One response was to argue that what mattered for Christians was truth rather than elegant expression. The second-century Christian philosopher Tatian says that Greek rhetoric is merely a bag of tricks for arguing whatever was convenient – even though Tatian's own stylistic choice is to use every rhetorical trick in the bag. Even the point that rhetoric is merely a means to dishonest persuasion is rooted in classical rhetoric.

A more nuanced discussion is that of the third-century bishop Gregory Thaumaturgus. Apologizing for his own inelegant language (another commonplace of classical rhetoric), he observes that for eight years he has associated only with Christians, who prioritize facts over words and are hardly elegant writers or speakers. He suggests, however, that far from being opposed to elegant expression, Christians might rather like to be able to cast beautiful thoughts in beautiful speech. But good thoughts and good words are difficult enough to achieve individually, even more difficult to combine – especially since good thoughts are developed through silent contemplation, while good words are developed through speaking. He concludes that 'if a seemly and well-sounding word comes to us (Christians) from somewhere, we gladly welcome it, although we do not set store by such things'.

Gregory here defends Christians' use of unpretentious Greek without condemning elegant Greek: he claims for Christians the right to use whatever Greek they are able and willing to use. In practice, Greek Christianity came to embrace diversity in matters of Greek. Expression did, after all, matter. Ideas might be more important than their expression, but ideas appeal to different audiences when expressed in different ways. An extreme example from the fifth century A.D. is Nonnus of Panopolis' paraphrase of St John's Gospel in Homeric hexameters and in language strongly reminiscent of Homer. 'I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness' becomes *φωνή ἐγὼ βοόωντος ἐρημάδος ἔνδοθι πέτρης*/*phōnē egō boōōntos erēmados éndothi pétres* 'I am the voice of one crying in a desolate cave', with the distinctively Homeric forms *ἔνδοθι*/*éndothi* 'inside'; *βοόωντος*/*boōōntos* 'of one crying' rather than *βοώντος*/*boōntos*; and *πέτρης*/*pétrēs* 'cave' (genitive) rather than *πέτρας*/*pétrās*. The long final vowel of the first word, *φωνή*/*phōnē* 'voice', is treated as short before another vowel: a rhythmic peculiarity of Homer and deliberately evocative. The poet even creates new Homeric-style epithets and formulae: while Homeric heroes address each other 'with winged words', Jesus addresses his disciples 'with puzzling speech'. This is a Gospel for Greeks whose favourite author was Homer, the 'Bible of the Greeks'.

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